

[1]

# Deducing Purpose: What Are People For?

by Robert Bedrosian\*

*I wondered what Poirot saw in them [the placement of objects on a table] to make him so intent. I asked him.*

*"Mon ami," he replied, "you miss the point. I am looking for something that I do **not** see."* Hercule Poirot in Agatha Christie's short story "The Adventure of the Italian Nobleman" from Poirot Investigates (1924).

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Though no one knows what people are for, it may be possible to deduce an answer. We are trying to see ourselves as a species, as a phenomenon, yet we ourselves are human and therefore have biases which are "hard wired." Is it possible to look beyond ourselves, at ourselves? We acknowledge, right at the start, that every conclusion offered on this subject is speculative.

Nonetheless, we do have some tools to approach the topic. The tools available to us for such an investigation, while useful for studying other topics, have peculiar limitations when applied to humanity itself as a species. The tool of scrupulous direct observation may help in some areas, though here it must be augmented with scientific observations from telescopes, microscopes, and other devices. The standard tools of the historian—primary and secondary sources—even when expanded to include information from geology, physical anthropology, biology, and other disciplines, usually produce conclusions with a human-centric bias. Potentially, the most important tool or technique to approach the question of human purpose may be analogous reasoning. In any case, we always return to the fact that we are too close to the subject: we are humans, living in human societies, and living on Earth.

Perhaps, mentally, we can zoom away from Earth briefly and make some observations from outer space. Viewed from outer space, Earth is a watery world. Some 70% of the planet's surface is water. Living organisms exist in all the planet's zones: the atmosphere, the oceans, the land, and below the surface. We humans are also some 70% water in our composition, and our blood has approximately the same salinity as the ocean. For that reason humans, arguably, could be seen as part of the planet's hydrosphere. The other fauna and flora of our planet also could be seen—from the planet's point of view—as part of a moisturizing foundation for the land or the zones they occupy.

[2]

Let us return from outer space to Earth and examine some of our other tools. None of the historical sources ponder what people are for. Written historical sources are entirely too recent and too human-centric to help. Indeed, our species, which has been around for less than 100,000 years, only has a written record of itself for about the last 4,000 years. Nonetheless, if we look very generically at the processes recorded in our historical sources, we see that they describe the increase or spreading of humans. From the Old World to the New World, it is a story of spreading.

From the physical, organic standpoint as well, we are here to spread. Because our organs of generation and of pleasure are one and the same, there will always be children (wanted or unwanted, "legitimate" or "illegitimate"). We, by our physical design, are intended and encouraged to spread. It is the default. Our religions also encourage growth. Our religious scriptures are also, perhaps understandably, human-centric—placing humans not only at the center of all other life on Earth, but somehow separate from it, and superior to it.

Regarding humans as a ground cover—as bags of water that can walk around—could have a liberating effect on our thinking. Next we may wonder what else about us derives from planet Earth, or from being part of planet Earth. For example, the Russian scientist Alexander Chizhevsky demonstrated a link between sunspot activity and human wars. What if our eras of cultural brilliance are caused by different solar radiations or by planet Earth's own processes? What if our cultural phenomena are comparable to the changing foliage of trees, or the appearance of rainbows—in other words, processes largely outside us, though we take credit for them. Admittedly, certain cherished notions and institutions that humans have had would lose some of their luster. The differences among human groups, such as skin color, language, and culture—differences people have fought and died for—*might* seem less important, though it is unlikely.

Although raising the question of the purpose of humanity may seem foolish at first, examining the topic could be a great help to us in knowing ourselves. For example, since our organisms are a creation of planet Earth, what would the colonization of other planets mean? Would we have to carry our environment with us and try to transform another world, even though we do not yet grasp the nature of our own world and our connection with it? As another practical example, to put our "intelligence" into a robot, we need to know how we store and retrieve information in our organic brains. To make a non-organic intelligent robot, just like us, we need to know ourselves, and we do not.

Thus the question of human purpose leads to other questions, difficult to ponder, but essential to ponder for our advancement.

## Notes

From the beginning of time people have wondered about the purpose of human life. Certainly philosophers, poets, naturalists, scientists, among others, have pondered and written about it. It is beyond our competence to provide footnotes on the history of the topic beyond noting the works that directly influenced us.

Among our favorites are: Edward Burnett Tylor's *Primitive Culture* (London, 1871); Ellen Churchill Semple's *Influences of Geographic Environment, on the basis of Ratzel's system of Anthro-Geography* (New York, 1911); Alexander Chizhevsky's "Physical Factors of the Historical Process," from the journal *Cycles* January (1971) pp. 11-27. Translated from Russian and condensed by Vladimir P. de Smitt, this is the text of an important paper delivered at the American Meteorological Society in 1926; and A. L. Kroeber's *An Anthropologist Looks at History* (Berkeley, 1963).

Wikipedia has some stunning articles dealing with our planet and ourselves, with bibliography and links to additional topics. These thought-provoking entries include:

[Gaia Hypothesis](#)

[Human Geography](#)

[Environmental Determinism](#)

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